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AUTHOR McKinney, Floyd L.; Halasz-Salster, Ida
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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive literature review and case studies of three community colleges and one technical institute were conducted as part of a study to determine the economic and educational factors which relate positively or negatively to the successful placement of students who have completed postsecondary vocational programs. Data gathered through interviews, on-site observations, and an examination of documents at each institution were used to characterize the colleges in terms of service district population, area unemployment rate, facilities, enrollment, and program offerings; to rank order to colleges in terms of student placement rates in jobs related to their fields of study; and to determine the relationship of the colleges' institutional and contextual characteristics with these placement rates. Selected findings reveal that the community and labor force factors associated with high placement rates included area employment availability, the level of the community's economic development, and the absence of other postsecondary institutions in the service district. Institutional factors associated with high job placement rates included commitment to job placement as an educational priority and to remaining responsive to present and future labor needs. The study report outlines characteristics of the institutions exhibiting this commitment and details case study findings, and describes the methodology of a survey in progress. (JP)

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FACTORS AFFECTING JOB PLACEMENT OF FORMER POSTSECONDARY VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

by

Floyd L. McKinney
Senior Research Specialist

and

Ida Halasz-Salster
Research Specialist

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

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Ida Halasz-Salster

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FACTORS AFFECTING JOB PLACEMENT OF FORMER POSTSECONDARY VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present a synthesis of the preliminary findings and emerging general impressions from a project which uses qualitative and quantitative data. The project, "Factors Affecting Job Placement in Vocational Education", was funded by the U.S. Department of Education at the Ohio State University. The purpose of the project was to determine those factors affecting job placement that can be used in establishing policy and in making decisions to improve postsecondary vocational-technical education at the federal, state, and local levels. The objectives of the project were:

1. To identify factors relating positively or negatively to the placement of former postsecondary vocational education students in jobs related to their training.

2. To provide a detailed description of the education and community processes which appear to influence the placement of former postsecondary vocational-technical education students in jobs related to their training.

3. To generate hypotheses concerning variables about the placement of former postsecondary vocational-technical education students in jobs related to their training.

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* The study reported herein was funded by the U.S. Department of Education as a part of the contract for The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. This report of the study is preliminary. Reports of the study findings will not be released by the National Center or the U.S. Department of Education until after January 31, 1982.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable for the study was the percentage of former postsecondary vocational-technical education students from a local education agency employed in a field related to their training.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Several procedures were used to achieve the project objectives. The following list briefly summarizes the research procedures used to study the factors influencing the placement of former vocation-technical education students in jobs related to their training.

- A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted.
- Questionnaires were developed and sent to 12,000 prospective respondents in thirty-two local postsecondary education sites located in four states.
- Case studies were conducted in four local postsecondary education sites in four states. The four case study sites were selected from the thirty-two local postsecondary education sites.

The final report of the study, due in January 1982, will be organized around the major emerging issues or factors related to the job placement of former postsecondary vocational-technical education students. Quantitative and qualitative information will be synthesized and presented for each of the issues or factors. At the time this paper was written, the questionnaires were being mailed to the prospective respondents. Therefore, the findings presented in the paper represent information only from the review of literature and the case studies.

Sampling

In the first stage of sampling, four states were selected to participate in the study. These states were selected on the basis of the states having an operating management information system and a strong commitment to postsecondary vocational-technical education programs. Consideration was given to selecting states which would provide as much geographical representation as possible. In addition, key officials in the states had to indicate a willingness to participate in the study.

In the second sampling stage local postsecondary education sites were selected to serve as questionnaire sites. Two major decisions were made regarding this sampling stage. First, it was

decided that the sample of postsecondary sites would be selected within each of the states rather than across states. Based on results of the literature review and discussions with consultants, the project staff determined that the differences in organization and governance systems for postsecondary institutions among the four states were major enough to invalidate any attempt to aggregate sampling frames across states.

A second decision was made to include in the sampling frame within each state only one type of organizational pattern (community college, techical institute, vocational-technical education school) for postsecondary vocational-technical education programs. This decision was made because of the tremendous variation in the organization and governance patterns for postsecondary vocational-technical education programs. In three states the community colleges were the organizational pattern studied. Vocational-technical institutions were studied in one state.

The postsecondary institutions in each of the four states were stratified on the basis of two major variables:

- Average job placement rate of former vocational-technical education students in each state. Those institutions having placement rates above the median were considered high placement sites. Those institutions with placement rates falling below the median point were considered low placement sites.

- The level of labor market demand. High labor market demand was defined as having unemployment rates of 5.9 percent and below. Low labor market demand was defined as having unemployment rates of 6.0 percent and above.

The classifications of job placement rate (high, low) and labor market demand (high, low) resulted in a 2 x 2 design with four cells. Once the local institutions in a state had been stratified, an attempt was made to randomly select two local institutions from each of the four cells to serve as mail questionnaire sites.

In the final stage of sampling for the mail questionnaire phase of the study, individuals were selected from among the eight respondent groups at each of the thirty-two local institutions. For five of the groups, every member of the respondent group was sent a questionnaire. This strategy was used due to the relatively small size of the groups at each institutions. These groups were: (1) deans or directors or postsecondary vocational-technical education programs, (2) postsecondary vocational-technical education teachers, (3) postsecondary guidance/vocational counselors, (4) postsecondary job placement specialists, and (5) members of post-secondary institution vocational-technical education advisory

committees. Because of the cost constraints and the large size of the remaining three respondent groups, a sample was selected for (1) current postsecondary vocational-technical education students, (2) former postsecondary vocational-technical education students, and (3) employers of former postsecondary vocational-technical education students.

For the case study phase of the project, one institution was selected in each of the four states. These selections were based on judgment. The case study sites represented high and low job placement sites. Two of the study sites were very large and complex institutions. One of the institutions was located in the inner city. One institution was located in a small rural setting. Three of the institutions were community colleges and one was a postsecondary vocational-technical school.

In summary, the study procedures used in the project consisted of a comprehensive review of the literature, case studies in four postsecondary institutions, and the mailing of questionnaires to 12,000 individuals in eight respondent groups in thirty-two postsecondary institutions.

FINDINGS

Introduction

As discussed previously, the findings were derived from case studies of four institutions at four sites and from the review of literature.

The case studies focused on those factors that affect the placement of former postsecondary vocational-technical students in jobs related to their training. Historically, a major purpose of vocational-technical education programs has been the number of former students placed in jobs for which trained. In addition, the 1976 legislation, P.L. 94-482, mandated that vocational-technical education be evaluated by the rate of placement of former students in jobs related to their training. It is rather obvious that a wide range of factors affect job placement rates. The focus of this study was on the factors or educational variables that can be manipulated to some degree by policy makers and decision makers.

The final selection of the postsecondary institutions for the case studies was made by the project staff and the project liaison person named by the head of the appropriate governing agency in each state. To maintain confidentiality, which was assured prior to the agreements to participate in the study, exact locations and names of individuals are not provided in this report. In writing this report, the institutions are identified as Site A, Site B, Site C, and Site D.

The four case study sites were well distributed geographically, representing the north, south, east and west. The institutions were located in different types of communities - from a small rural town to a metropolitan city. Three of the institutions were community colleges while the fourth was a vocational-technical education school. Two of the sites had relatively high job placement rates and two had relatively low job placement rates.

Perhaps the most elusive information to identify at all but one of the four sites was the actual rate of job placement. It is important to note that mechanisms for collecting and reporting job placement data varied from site to site. As this rate is very important to the educators at Site A, former students have been closely followed up. The officially reported rate at Site A is 95 percent placement in related jobs, although several interviewees said it was 100 percent for many vocational areas. In contrast, at one low job placement site, a director frankly stated that "we hire an official guesser to do the placement reports as required for the VEDS data."

When selecting the sites, the state liaison persons had identified them as either high or low placement sites relative to others in the state. The case studies of the four sites confirmed these designations which indicated that Sites A and B had high rates of job placement compared to Sites C and D where job placement rates appeared to be much lower. When the data for the four sites were analyzed, the designations shown in Figure 1 were made.

Figure 1

RATES OF JOB PLACEMENT OF THE CASE STUDY SITES

Case Study Site		Case Study Designed Job Placement Rate
A	Vocational-technical education school	Highest
B	Community college	High
C	Community college	Lowest
D	Community college	low

Community and Labor Market Context of the Case Study Sites

Vocational-technical education occurs in context of the environment which includes economic, socio-demographic, geographic, political and educational variables. While the scope of this exploratory study was broad to incorporate the multitude of relevant factors, the contextual variables were not analyzed in great depth. Obviously the contextual variables interact with the educational variables and the boundaries are often indistinguishable. Consideration of the community, labor market, and educational variables is essential to describe the setting where job placement occurs. In this study the diversity among the sites is useful in analyzing the factors over which educators have some control to increase the placement of former students in jobs related to their training. Figure 2 provides an overview of the community and labor market information for the four case study sites.

Figure 2

COMMUNITY AND LABOR MARKET CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY SITES

Site	Description of Location	Population	Unemployment Rate*	Major Employers
A - Vocational-Technical Education School	Urban; Middle-sized city	95,000 --- 99% white 1% minority	7.2%	shipping, mining, railroads, steel construction
B - Community College	Urban; fast growing city with suburban-like atmosphere	900,000 --- 39% white 61% minority	8.2%	manufacturing, agricultural business
C - Community College	Rural town; largest in sparsely populated section of state	20,000 --- 99% white 1% minority	6.8%	diversified tool and die, paper mills, insurance, utility companies
D - Community College	Urban; fast growing. Concentrates much of state's population	1,800,000 --- 79% white 21% minority	7.6%	shipping & fishing, tourism, Federal gov't., manufacturing, construction, military

* At the time of site visit

Site A is located in a mid-sized city with an almost homogeneous white population. This contrasts sharply with Site B located in a large, growing city with a majority minority population. Site C is located in a small town with less than 200 minorities. This town, however, is the largest in the county, and serves as the county seat. Site D is located in the heart of a growing city with a significant 21 percent minority population along with uncounted numbers of illegal aliens.

At the times of the site visits, the unemployment rates ranged from 6.8 percent to 8.2 percent. The rates fluctuated a great deal during 1980, however, at all sites. In at least one case, seasonal unemployment was reflected in the reported rate. The economic base at each site was diversified, with several types of manufacturing important at all sites to some degree. At Sites A and C, a "high work ethic" was evident while a more casual work attitude was noted at the other two sites.

Growth in population and in the number of businesses/ industries was evident at Sites B and D. Economic development was a high priority of key officials at all sites. Post-secondary vocational education was viewed as an integral and vital component of economic development at Sites A and B. These institutions had the highest job placement rates of the four sites studied. At Site B, the director of vocational-technical education was an active member of a well-organized and powerful economic development committee of community leaders.

Each case study site occupied a unique position in its community relative to the other opportunities for postsecondary education. In those communities affording many such choices, the case study institution did not appear to be as important as in the communities with far fewer educational opportunities.

Figure 3 indicates that Sites A and C were the only two-year public institutions located in the respective communities. There were two or more four-year institutions located in or near these sites, however. Of all four sites, Site D had the greatest number and most diverse public postsecondary institutions in the immediate region.

Figure 3

OTHER POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES AT THE CASE STUDY SITES

Vocational-Technical Education School A	Community College B	Community College B	Community College B
No other postsecondary institutions; two four-year institutions in the city	Another branch of the community college - no other 2-year institutions; several 4-year institutions in the city	No other post-secondary institutions in town - many 4-year institutions in the surrounding region	Numerous other post-secondary institutions; both 2-year & 4-year in the city

In concluding this very brief description, it is important to emphasize the diversity in the community and labor market context of the four sites. There were many differences despite apparent similarities. The unemployment rates appeared fairly similar on the surface, but in at least one case did not include the large number of illegal aliens who also were seeking jobs. The major types of employment also appeared similar, but did not portray the numbers working in other occupations endemic to the region, for example, home crafts in the rural town and surrounding region at Site C.

Educational Context of the Case Study Sites

The four sites differed in the educational programs offered in the settings provided for the programs. As indicated in Figure 4, Sites A and C were housed in a single building that contained all other services and programs offered by the school. While all of the programs at Site A were vocational-technical, many of the vocational-technical programs at Site C were considered transfer "career" courses. At both Sites B and D, the vocational-technical programs were increasing in number and enrollments, and were housed in at least two buildings on a multi-building campus. Site D had a very compact, inner-city setting, with numerous levels along with connecting ramps for the physically handicapped. Site B had an open, spacious campus, typical of a four-year college environment.

Figure 4

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF CASE STUDY SITES

Site	Description	Enrollments (Approximate)	Programs Offered
A - Vocational Technical Education School	Single building in downtown area	1,300 vocational technical students	All vocational-technical education: accounting, data processing, agri-business, transportation, construction, drafting, secretarial, health care, communications and media, manufacturing, marketing and distribution, commerical goods, and public service.
B - Community College	Multi-building campus in downtown area - voc/tech housed in two buildings	21,000 total 8,600 vocational-technical students	Liberal arts; vocational technical education: mid-management, fire science, law enforcement, real estate, nursing, engineering technology, drafting, data processing, home building, radio-TV, mortuary science, dental assisting, business technology, etc.
C - Community College	Single building on edge of twon - voc/tech housed through-out	1,400 total 800 vocational-technical students	Liberal arts; vocational technical education: accounting, early childhood education, fire science, graphic design, industrial technology, recreation management, marketing, communication, nursing, secretarial, production mgmt., etc.
D - Community College	Multi-building campus in downtown area-voc/tech housed in several buildings	19,500 total 10,000 vocational-technical students	Liberal arts; vocational technical education: Business, including accounting mgmt., secretarial, real estate, data processing, etc. Technical education, including art, auto body, cabinet making, diesel technology, electronics, fast-food, nursing, telecommunications, welding, etc.

Community and Labor Market Factors Affecting Job Placement

Numerous factors affecting job placement emerged from the analysis of the data from hundreds of interviews, observations on site and reviews of documents and records. The most important community and labor market factors appeared to be:

- o size of community
- o economic development
- o overall unemployment rate
- o employment available in specific vocational area
- o other postsecondary opportunities available
- o general community attitude towards vocational-technical education

The size of the community appeared to be important not only for these four case study sites, but in other components of the study. Higher job placement rates were evident in mid-sized communities as opposed to very large or very small communities. Very small communities had few business or industries available to place students in related jobs. In very large communities the interaction between school personnel and business or industry representatives were much lower than in mid-sized communities. The former students of the specific schools were less known by reputation for quality in the very large communities.

The economic situation of the sites were discussed foremost by most interviewees as important to job placement. The overall rate was important as an indicator of the general economic "health" of the community. More importantly, as interviewees agreed, job placement rates depended on the amount of employment available in the specific vocational areas. While at Site B employers hired all the computer technology students available, often prior to graduation, at Site D computer technology graduates found they were not hired because they had no experience. Yet the overall unemployment rate at Site D was lower than at Site B.

One of the outstanding factors contributing to the high job placement rate at Site A and B appeared to be the quality of economic development. Economic development was engineered to fit the needs and potential of the respective communities of these sites. The types of vocational-technical courses offered at Site A and B were closely oriented to the needs of

the developing industries. In sharp contrast, economic development was virtually nonexistent at Site C, where few beginning positions were available in the long-standing, stable industries. Middle-aged workers held and intended to keep their jobs in the few vocational or technical oriented businesses and industries in the community.

The rate of job placement was higer for the two of the four sites with fewer other postsecondary schools offering vocational-technical education in the immediate region. It appeared that since the communities depended upon Sites A and B to provide a significant amount of postsecondary education, they were more aware of their contributions to economic growth. Another important consideration in this regard was the community's attitude toward the purpose of postsecondary education. At the two high placement sites, vocational-technical education was a higher priority than at the two low placement sites. At the lowest placement site there was a pronounced lack of enthusiasm for vocational-technical education in comparison to the high regard for academic education.

Educational Factors Affecting Job Placement

Educators and other decision makers can do relatively little, if anything, about the community and labor market factors that affect job placement. There are a number of factors policy makers and decision makers can influence to enhance the placement of former students in jobs related to their vocational-technical education. The two major factors are:

1. Commitment to job placement as the major goal of vocational-technical education, and

2. Responsiveness to meet present and future local employment needs.

For high job placement rates, the first major factor of commitment to job placement as the goal of vocational-technical education is necessary in the school philosophy whether or not it is explicitly written as such. At the four case study sites it appears that a strong commitment to job placement contributes higher rates of job placement. The mission statement of Site A, which had the highest job placement rate of the four sites, stated that "the prime objective of this institution is preparation for gainful employment." Conversely, the chief administrator at the lowest placement site (Site C) said, "the college has no responsibility for placement. We are not an employment agency." At Site B, the community college with a high job placement rate, the school personnel assumed, as

one interviewee explained, that "placement is the end result of going to school in the technical education areas."

The commitment to job placement must prevail not only in the administration but also in the state and school level long-range planning and the day-to-day activities of the school. While essential that the administrators support and encourage job placement, it is equally important that the faculty members view job placement as their goal and take responsibility for placing students.

Therefore, several other factors are necessary for high job placement rates at vocational-technical schools. The following factors are closely linked to the first major factor of commitment to job placement:

a. Planning at the state and school levels is based on meeting the goals of placing students in jobs related to training.

b. Resources are allocated for job placement and follow-up services.

c. Adequate facilities and equipment are provided to teach relevant curricula.

d. Faculty members believe placement is largely their responsibility.

e. Curricula include objectives for meeting this goal.

While placement was spoken about as an important goal of vocational-technical education at Site D, a low placement site, there were insufficient resources (personnel, office space, etc.) allocated for job placement at the school. A district job placement office was available, but few students knew it existed or wanted to use it since it was not conveniently located at their school. At this site the teachers were told to report numbers of placements they had made each month to the job placement officer but appeared to believe that placement was not really their responsibility.

At the site with the highest job placement rates, planning of programs, facility utilization, and resource allocation were based on providing relevant curriculum which would result in the placement of all students leaving with competence in a vocational-technical area. The written contract with faculty at this site included job placement as a responsibility of all teachers. At the other high placement site (Site B) the faculty believed they had a significant role in job placement although it was not explicitly stated in their contracts. At

both high placement sites, the curricula included objectives for understanding the processes for obtaining jobs and keeping them. Work attitudes and responsibilities were addressed to satisfy local employer needs.

The second major factor that can be influenced by educators and decision makers is a responsiveness to meet present and future local employment needs. This factor is also closely linked with other factors which are:

a. Collaboration with employers, economic developers, and employment services.

b. Coordination with other education providers in the community.

c. Use of input provided by advisory/craft committees.

d. Development of curricula that is highly relevant to local needs.

e. Collection and use of follow-up data.

f. Flexible scheduling of courses to accomodate students.

Responsiveness through collaboration and coordination with relevant organizations in the community is essential for high placement. At the high placement sites the administrators and teachers organized advisory committees to include key community and business representatives. Advisory committees not only convened frequently, they addressed pertinent issues. Advisory committee input was used in long and short term planning, and in shaping the curriculum at Sites A and B. Advisory committee members at Site B pointed out numerous changes in the curriculum that resulted from their input over the past years. At Site A all changes in the curriculum had to be approved by advisory council members. At the low placement sites, advisory committees met on a regularly scheduled basis but did not appear to have much significant input into the planning or content of the curriculum.

The crux of job placement appeared to be responsiveness to the changing needs of the community members and businesses through relevant curricula. The old cliche, "being at the right place at the right time with the right product" could be applied at the high placement sites. This philosophy of responsiveness which was essential to high placement was displayed in the continual, deliberate effort of school personnel to assess the employment needs in the community, to solicit the advise of influential community members and to implement their recommendations. In turn, at the high placement

sites the schools were viewed as an integral component in the economic development of the community. The responsiveness of these sites to local labor needs attracted new businesses/ industries and encouraged expansion or changes in the existing ones.

At high placement sites key administrators coordinated with other community organizations and schools to plan comprehensively and to avoid duplication wherever possible. Competition from a few other postsecondary schools was a positive influence for efforts to attract students, to meet community needs, and place students at the high placement sites. At Site D, however, there was too much competition from the multitude of other postsecondary schools in the immediate area for sufficient numbers of possible placements, for quality students, and community support.

At the high placement sites follow-up activities were conducted regularly to assess previous student and employer satisfaction and recommendations. At Sites A and B, the data from these follow-ups was disseminated to the faculty and was used to make changes to meet student and employer needs. The high placement sites scheduled classes to meet both student and employer needs. At the request of the employers, teachers at Site B conducted classes during lunch hours at places of business or industry. At Site A there was an open-entry, open-exit system which allowed students to take courses without waiting for the beginning of a school term. Students took courses at their own pace, mastering each competency required before moving on to the next one. At the low placement sites, the scheduling appeared less flexible, less responsive to the students and employer needs.

In conclusion, while numerous other factors undoubtedly affect job placement at postsecondary schools across the nation, this brief overview highlighted those factors that appeared to be most significant at the four case study sites. No factor stood alone, of course, as the explanation for high or low job placement at all sites. Every school was unique, although the factors that seemed to be most important for high or low placement were apparent at all four sites.

General Impressions

Severaly general impressions emerged from this study. If vocational-technical educators are to maximize placement rates of former students in jobs related to their vocational-technical education programs, it appears that several points should be given careful attention. Higher job placement seems to occur in those postsecondary schools where:

- there is a consistent philosophy concerning the schools commitment to job placement as the goal of vocational-technical education;
- there is a responsiveness to meet present and anticipated local labor market needs;
- the planning of programs at the state and school levels is based on enhancing job placement;
- there is continuous collaboration with employers, economic developers, and employment services;
- the advisory committee is carefully selected to include key community and business leaders whose input is used in planning;
- there is coordination with other education providers in the region;
- the teachers believe placement is largely their responsibility;
- the curriculum is relevant to meet present and anticipated labor market needs;
- the placement office is a clearinghouse that coordinates the resources and supports the teachers in their placement activities;
- adequate resources are allocated for placement and follow-up services which include appropriate personnel, convenience office spaces, flexible office hours, sufficient resource materials, computerized labor market information, and funds for publicity of the placement services and dissemination of the follow-up results;
- adequate facilities and up-to-date equipment are provided to teach relevant curriculum;
- follow-up data is collected from former students and local employers and used for planning;
- there is flexible scheduling of classes and programs to accomodate students and employers; and
- the community is regularly informed of the opportunities available for obtaining vocational-technical education relevant to the local labor market and for hiring former students who have been educated for employment in local labor market.

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